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SUBJECT: MALAYSIA'S YOUNGEST MUFTI PROMOTES TOLERANCE AND  
REFORM

REF: 06 KUALA LUMPUR 2080

SUMMARY

1. The recently appointed Mufti of Perlis, Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin, who at the age of only 35 is Malaysia's youngest state religious leader, is challenging the conservative trend line of Islam in Malaysia. With excellent Middle Eastern and Malaysian educational credentials, Asri advocates for individuals' rights to interpret their religion and propagates approaches to the Quran in line with modern circumstances. As he struggles to reverse the hold that conservatives have held over the Muslim community, he continues to draw both praise and criticism. It is no small coincidence that the first mufti appointed since Abdullah Badawi became prime minister is a young progressive whose teachings coincide so closely with Abdullah's own concept of Islam Hadhari. Accordingly, Asri's appointment as the Mufti of Perlis has a much broader impact than one might assume from his position in Malaysia's smallest state. The cleric's youth, zeal, education, and progressive stance on Islam have attracted national attention. Asri clearly represents Abdullah's concept of Islam's future in Malaysia - compassionate, progressive, egalitarian and firmly-footed in the Quran. End Summary.

BREAKING THE CONSERVATIVE HOLD ON ISLAM

2. Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin, 35, the youngest person in the country to hold the post of mufti is a Penang-born religious scholar. He is married and has four children. Mohd Asri completed his Bachelor of Arts from University of Jordan before obtaining his Masters of Arts degree from Malaysian Science University, Penang. He later earned a PhD from the International Islamic University of Malaysia. His areas of expertise include the Hadith, Science of Hadith fiqh, methodologies of fiqh, Quranic exigencies, Quranic studies, Arabic language and Islamic history. Mohd Asri was a lecturer at the Malaysian Science University from 2003 until November 1, 2006, when he was appointed the Mufti of Perlis.

3. As mufti, Asri's role is to advise the Sultan of Perlis and the Perlis state government on all matters of Islamic law. Although Perlis is Malaysia's smallest state, Asri has attracted much media attention for preaching moderation and a more flexible interpretation of Islam. The views advocated by Asri have created a stir among his more conservative mufti colleagues from the other states. He stated in an interview recently that the biggest challenge before the Muslim community was to "overhaul the hold that the conservatives have exercised over the Muslim community."

"ISLAM LIGHT AND EASY"

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¶4. In his recent interview with Malaysia's independent online news portal, Malaysiakini, Mohd Asri laments that radical interpretations and Quranic quotes taken out of context have confused many mainstream Malaysian Muslims. Muslims should, according to Asri, challenge their leaders and the religious "experts" and reject radicalism. Explaining his point of view, he stated, "...the interpretations of the Quran and Sunnah (even) by the religious experts are open to evaluation. When someone evaluates your interpretation, it does not mean he is rejecting the Quran and the Sunnah. He is merely rejecting your understanding of it." It is the nature of the Quran, according to Asri, to allow Muslims to question and challenge their religious leaders about the teachings and practices of Islam.

¶5. Asked about his personal agenda and his task, Mohd Asri told Malaysiakini that he is not trying to renew the Quran and Sunnah himself (by deciding what is authentic or what is not) but he is only renewing the understanding of the Quran and Sunnah and trying to change the approach used by Muslims to understand their religion. He contends that Islam should be explained by the use of modern words and meanings and by approaches that are more in line with the current environment. Asri has expressed his desire to push Islam towards modernity and away from extremism. He proposes a different reading of the Islamic sacred texts to create a modern and compassionate Islam. "I explain Islam in a simple manner. It is Islam light and easy. I use rational discussions and ideas to influence. I do not scold them (fellow Muslims)."

¶6. Mohd Asri does not blame non-Muslims for misunderstanding

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Islam. Instead, he lays the blame on the shoulders of Muslims themselves "who through their attitudes, their appearance and their focus on petty issues have portrayed Islam as a backward religion." He teaches that Muslims have perpetuated such negative attitudes by turning non-religious matters into religion.

ASRI RANKLES RELIGIOUS CONSERVATIVES  
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¶7. Asri recently spoke out against Malaysia's conservative efforts to enforce its religious laws through "khalwat raids." Khalwat is defined as an "immoral activity" in a secluded area or confined place by Muslim man or a woman with another partner or partners who are not their legal spouse or close relative. State religious departments employ officers to enforce Islamic moral codes and to haul violators before a Shariah court for judgment. Mohd Asri mentioned the October 2006 incident where an older American couple on a sailing holiday in Malaysia encountered such a raid by religious police. Their hotel room was raided by Islamic authorities who refused to believe they were Christians and had been married for 42 years (reftel). Mohd Asri said, "It is an embarrassment to Islam to see religious officers going to hotels and demanding the guest list. Islam does not encourage people to look for acts of sin and to invade an individual's privacy is against Islam." He explained that he condemns khalwat raids simply because Islam considers it "haram" to snoop or invade people's privacy. "If there are immoral activities, then we have to stop them, but if someone is hiding, then there is no need to bang on their doors," he added.

¶8. Consequently, Asri has been the target of criticism by more than a few conservative muftis, as well as the opposition party- Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS). Some PAS critics have described Asri as an "UMNO stooge" or "UMNO's pimp," and lambasted him for advocating "Do It Yourself Islam" (for suggesting that the interpretation of the Quran

and Sunnah by the religious experts are open to evaluation). Indeed, he has been generally castigated by the conservative religious movement. Responding to these criticisms, Asri stated, "I am open and prepared to be criticized. I am ready to discuss and debate with anyone who has knowledge of Islam. But name calling and crude language is a reflection of the lowest level of intellect."

¶9. Conservative NGOs and politicians in the ruling government have joined the bandwagon in criticizing Asri's progressive interpretations of Islam and have accused him of further confusing Malaysian Muslims. The Islamic NGO Teras Pengupayaan Melayu (Teras, Malay Empowerment Group) president Mohd Azmi Abdul Hamid publicly expressed his resentment towards Mohd Asri's views. He claimed that Asri's liberal mindset may bring more confusion to Muslims, and he criticized similar liberal thinkers "who normally neglect the need to curb immoral activities and punish wrongdoers." Dr. Abdullah Mohamed Zin, a minister in the Prime Minister's Department, also chided Asri and urged him to avoid making statements that may bring confusion to Muslims. President of the Malaysian Shari'a Lawyers Association, Zainul Rijal Abu Bakar and a former religious officer to the King, Dr. Abu Hassan Din, both urged Asri to discuss with other shari'a lawyers or those with expertise in the religion before issuing public statements on especially controversial issues.

#### CHALLENGING THE OLD GUARD

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¶10. Not one to back away from his principles, Asri has publicly engaged more conservative muftis on their Malay-centric interpretation of Islam in Malaysia. In one example, the Malaysian Chinese Muslim Association (MCMA) had proposed to build a new mosque for the Chinese Muslim community of Perak. They had been waiting for the past three years for approval from the state government, all to no avail. Their original petition was initially rejected by more conservative muftis, most vocally the Mufti of Perak, Harrusani Zakaria. Harrusani declared that building different mosques (for both the Malays and the Chinese) would only segregate Muslims. Asri rejected these excuses outright and made it clear that the idea that Islam in Malaysia must be Malay in all forms was wrong. He said it was unfair of state governments to deny permits to the Chinese Muslims based on the mistaken concept that Islam could only mean Malay language sermons, customs and traditions. Such conservative ideas, according to Asri, discouraged non-Muslims from wanting to know about Islam and at the same time denied the non-Malay Muslims the right to hear Friday

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sermons in their mother tongue. Asri reminded his fellow muftis that "Chinese from China have been Muslim hundreds of years before the Malays accepted Islam. I believe state authorities should give permission for Chinese Muslims to build their mosques." Asri stressed that "It's the faith that matters, not race." Asri added that if the state government was not willing to fund the construction of a Chinese mosque, he was prepared to raise donations from the public to do so. Asri's argument seems to have taken hold, and Harussani later backed down from his opposition to the Chinese mosques.

#### ON INTER-RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE

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¶11. Asri has stated that contrary to the tendency of many Muslims to react negatively to questions and criticisms of their religion, Islam teaches just the opposite response is required. Islam, according to Asri, accords its detractors space to articulate their doubts and arguments. He points to a citation in the Quran, "Bring forth your arguments if you are indeed truthful," and "summon your witnesses other than Allah if you are indeed truthful," to justify his argument.

Unlike many other religious officials in Malaysia, Asri is prepared and willing to engage non-Muslims on practically all issues.

#### CONCLUSION AND COMMENT

¶12. Asri's four-month tenure as the Mufti of Perlis has already led the public to two distinct conclusions: liberals consider him a breath of fresh air while conservatives have accused him of "reinventing Islam." Such criticisms are not unique to Asri as Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi has also been the subject of similar complaints -- that he, too, has tried to reinvent Islam through his concept of Islam Hadhari.

It seems to be no small coincidence that the first mufti appointed since Abdullah became prime minister is a young progressive whose teachings coincide so closely with Abdullah's concept of Islam Hadhari. Accordingly, Asri's appointment as the Mufti of Perlis has a much broader impact than one might assume from his platform in Malaysia's smallest state. His youth, education, and progressive stances on Islam have been given a national forum. The young, articulate cleric's solid Middle Eastern and Malaysian educational credentials provide him with a firm basis to challenge the conservatives' conclusions and offer alternatives. Asri appears to represent Abdullah's concept of Islam's future in Malaysia --compassionate, progressive, egalitarian and firmly-footed in the Quran.

SHEAR